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ABSTRACT

Official censorship should not exist in university theatre productions. What censorship does exist is primarily unofficial--often unspoken--and consists of group, authority, and financial pressures on the director and the production staff, influencing them to avoid risks necessary for artistic growth and intellectual development. This sort of control is much less perceptible than objective/official censorship and much more pervasive and persuasive. Directors of theatre productions often overrespond and censor themselves too much. Directors, instead, should learn the importance of risk (invention, experimentation, exploration, and vision) in order to learn and test. When a theatre director omits these elements from the planning and execution of a production, that is probably the worst kind of censorship possible. (HOD)

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Censorship and University Theatre
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Official censorship in the United States has in modern times, except during war, not enjoyed much official status. In keeping with the concept that in a basically democratic nation the people are capable of governing themselves the institution of an official censoring agency would be a contradiction, an unneeded and unpopular organ. There are, of course, laws state and federal which are intended to protect the rights and freedoms of citizens as well as cultural customs and mores which serve as guides and boundaries for personal and group behavior. Certainly there have been and will be strong impulses for official censorship of the media and public arts and the debate over artistic-social value versus morality will probably never be resolved as long as discussion is relatively free.

This does not mean that there is not any censoring going on, it just is not of the overt, direct kind. As Walter Kerr said in his lecture-essay Criticism and Censorship,^{*} that if no one person is the official censor then the prudent tries to make everyone a censor. That, many feel, is much better, more the 'American way'--self regulation rather than externally imposed restrictions from some official governing body. If this were as far as it went that would be probably quite healthy, but instead the process is only begun. Self-censorship can be useful and for most people probably unavoidable, but if the censorship impulse is strong enough to constitute a movement then, as Kerr outlines in his essay, this movement undertakes a series of programs which involve four phases or states: (1) the dissemination

^{*} Walter Kerr, Criticism and Censorship. Bruce Publishing Co., Milwaukee, 1954.

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of propaganda (2) the encouragement of amateur censorship (3) the proliferation of censorial bodies and (4) the establishment of a censorial attitude in society or large segments of society. It is with this last phase, the establishment of a censorial attitude in society or large segments of society, with which I have had some contact during my work in University Theatre.

Over a period of 25 years, 14 of them as a teacher and play director, and at six different colleges and universities, state and private, I have never, that I can remember, been told directly that I could not select a script for production because it was obscene, pornographic, seditious, taboo, anti-American or in some way grossly objectionable. What I did encounter on some occasions was a censorial attitude, usually from members of the production staff and in rarer instances from my departmental colleagues or college administration. On the whole, however, I would say that pre-production censorship in my experiences in University Theatre has not been as numerous nor as direct as censorship during rehearsal, performance and after the performances are over. I think this is the case for several reasons: (1) academic freedom is respected so long as it does not appear to pose a perceived threat to very many people or seriously endanger the image of the institution, (2) University Theatre, meant in this context as part of a humanist or liberal arts education, does not reach as wide an audience as do the more pervasive media such as radio, movies and TV, (3) most people who do attend university productions do not know in advance what they will see and hear nor do many students, faculty and people from the community know much about the plays selected and publicized by the university theatre. So that any objections that audiences or individual audience members might have would be expressed during the performances or shortly after the performances are over.

What pre-production censorship that does occur in University Theatre usually takes place within the production staff, or even earlier by the director who is selecting a script for inclusion in a series or season of plays. In the schools with which I have been associated, and I would estimate in most other colleges and universities, four to six scripts are selected for major production over the academic or calendar year. Usually there are several directors and the scripts chosen reflect some variety in historical period, cultural origin, and theatrical style. I do not recall that during the selection process any of these scripts were subject to final approval by the departmental chairperson or the school's administration.

Most university theatre directors worry more about staging difficulties such as how to costume actors, lighting effects, setting requirements and perhaps uppermost in their minds, will they have the talent for the roles. Still, even university theatre directors consider their audiences and other timely circumstances such as 'would it be a good choice for an election year, a good Christmastime production, a commemoration of Ibsen's birthday, etc.'

Economics is also an important aspect of selection if the theatre gets part or most of its budget from the sale of tickets. I would imagine that many or even most university theatres today get some monies from ticket sales. At USL, where I have been employed for the past eight years, we began charging a nominal admission fee just this past October in order to supplement our budget from the University. Because our production expenses have risen considerably and our budget allotment has remained virtually the same we needed to secure additional funds for productions. This new circumstance is beginning to have some influence on script selection and may or could become a significant kind of censorship in our future script selections. As our financing depends more on ticket sales there will be, I believe, the pressure to select scripts which are more likely to be popular with

our audiences, possibly reducing or modifying the University Theatre to the status of boulevard or dinner theatre. Last November I directed a production of Euripides' The Trojan Women. It was not popular with our audiences and I received a comment via the grapevine, allegedly made by one of our production staff, that now that we were charging admission scripts of that sort would not be produced since they would not 'sell'. Of course this could also work in reverse. Directors might be persuaded to select scripts which because of well known sensational effects or risque language and actions would attract audiences; or just the opposite, the 'safe' script where no one would be offended. If such considerations become the bases of script selection then there is a distortion or corruption of education and artistic values with the University Theatre running after audiences instead of leading them.

If a director does choose a script in which he or she feels there is possibly objectionable language, actions or attitudes--material which might offend audiences or actors or both--then the director has to deal with this difficulty in preparation before rehearsal, possibly during rehearsal, and on some occasions during performances. One of my most vivid experiences with production censorship occurred in 1968 when I directed a production of Lysistrata in Chicago.

In preparing for rehearsals and performances I decided during my study of the script, classical Greek Theatre and the then current climate politically and socially that I could produce Lysistrata as I had always wanted, with phalluses. This was not just a chance to see how much I could get away with, but my sincere belief that the phalluses were central to the comedy, necessary to recapture the bawdy and fantastical qualities of 'Old Comedy,' and to omit the phalluses was to lose much of the vitality and, no pun intended, the thrust of Aristophanic humor. The problem I felt was not if the phalluses should be used, but what sort of phalluses and how they were to be dealt with by the actors. Even without the phalluses Lysistrata is quite bawdy

and ribald, but I also felt that using the phalluses brought a greater degree of relevance or immediacy to the audiences of that time. Without, however, going further into my reasoning and associations I did make the decision before rehearsals began to use the phalluses. The next step was to find or fabricate a device which would be both appropriate in appearance and comedic effect.

My first approach was historical. I had our costumer construct a padded, leather covered object about a foot or so long by about three inches in diameter. We then worked with this object strapped to an actor in rehearsal. After this experiment we concluded that the 'historical' phallus was not comical because it was too real. I was not sure what else to use at that time, but I felt that at least we knew what we did not want.

Exactly when and how the solution came to me is unclear, but at sometime during my search for the appropriate phallic device I thought of balloons. After some thought and then consultation with the designer we tried them in rehearsal and they seemed to fit what I had in mind for the production. Perhaps best of all the balloons were not realistic but embodied and projected the qualities of play, fantasy and comedy and still no one would doubt their biological purpose. The balloons also had the additional advantages of being inexpensive, readily available in various colors, patterns, shapes and sizes and could be tied right on the actor's costume. Their inherent properties such as inflation, explosion, flotation and possible noises provided many ideas for use in the production. The actors liked them much more than the trial padded phalluses experimented with earlier, and they had no objections to using them in rehearsal, and as I suggested above they stimulated the actors' sense of play and comic invention. This was very encouraging but I was still unsure how audiences would react to the use of the phallus even if it was just a balloon.

When it came time for the performances I made sure that I was seated where I could see most of the audience. The theatre we performed in was of the 'open' or three-quarter thrust design similar to that used in ancient Greece so that by sitting near the stage and to one side I could see most of the audience. I especially wanted to see the audience reaction to the first appearance of the phalluses. This occurred during the confrontation between the two choruses, one of the old men and the other of old women. In our production we had equipped not only the principal males with balloon-phalluses but also the chorus of old men with smaller, but still visible, yellow balloons.

The audience reaction, really a series of reactions, on seeing the balloon-phalluses for the first time was memorable. At first, the response was a mixture of surprise, disbelief and embarrassment which, I am grateful to report, then flowed and transformed into laughter which increased in volume and, on some occasions, ended in applause. The actors remained 'frozen' onstage for the entire response which usually lasted from 30 seconds to over one minute. The audience was now prepared and favorably disposed for further use of the balloons on specific male characters when they appeared in later scenes. The production proved to be quite popular and no strong opposition or indignation was expressed to me during the run.

Shortly after the performances were over, however, I encountered one of my few experiences of post-production censure, which, to my way of thinking constitutes a form of censorship. I was informed by the Chairman of the Department that the President of the College wanted to see me, in fact the President wanted to see both the Department Chairman and myself about a matter which was, as far as I could ascertain vague. When we met with the President I was immediately asked why I had chosen to stage Lysistrata in the manner which I did, i.e., why did I have to use the phalluses? My defense I based upon the historical and comedic aspects which I mentioned

earlier. The President replied that he had seen a production of Lysistrata in the 30's, apparently designed by Norman Bel Geddes, in which the phalluses were not used and which the President had enjoyed. I admitted that non-phallic productions of Lysistrata could still be enjoyed by many, but that I felt that phalluses were necessary as I conceived the production and that our audiences found them comical rather than offensive. The President said that he had received some phone calls and letters (which he did not show me) objecting to the obscenity of the production. I should add here, parenthetically, that during the past few years our college president, like many college presidents in those days, was having a number of problems associated with civil rights, women's rights, was protests, etc. In fact, the day of the first performance of Lysistrata a group of students held a sit-in in the President's office and one of these students was the actress who was to portray Lysistrata in our production. The students were arrested and jailed and we made bail just in time for the actress to make the performance. This may have had some influence on the President's attitude toward the production. But whatever the President's motives were I could not deny that some people might find our production of Lysistrata objectionable, but that most had enjoyed and approved it. The President and I were at a stalemate and the Department Chairman assumed the role of peacemaker and moderator of our differences. The discussion was at an end, but as we left I had the feeling that I had been warned against taking such risks that might anger those in power and felt more inhibited toward selecting possible controversial scripts.

My next teaching job was at Jacksonville University in Jacksonville, Florida where I again encountered post-production censorship. The main difference here is that I was not the director in this case, but was technical director for a production of The Taming of the Shrew. The director had updated the historical time of the play placing the play's action in a contemporary time frame. During the scene where Petrucio and Kate are returning

as newly weds to Petruchio's villa they stop to rest and, in this production, the characters lie back on the grass and share a 'joint'.

Soon after Shrew had closed the director and I were called into the Dean's office. Why, the director was asked, had he included the use of a marijuana cigarette in a production of The Taming of the Shrew? The majority of our audience members had been high school students and wasn't this piece of stage action setting a bad example, encouraging young people to smoke the illegal and possibly harmful substance? The director said that he was only representing a common occurrence which he himself did not personally condone and that moreover the action added to the contemporaneity of the production. No official action was taken by the Dean and her concern must be understood in the context of the time and place. At that time there was considerable worry throughout the University's administration, particularly in relation to the College of Fine Arts, over the use, apparently widespread, of marijuana by students. I believe that had the Dean known in advance about the use of the marijuana cigarette in Shrew she would have urged that its use be cut from the production.

A more recent instance of censorship happened to me in the Spring of 1980. I had selected the Schnitzler script, La Ronde (Round Dance), as my directing assignment for April. This particular experience typifies, I believe, the sort of censorship which many University Theatre directors impose upon themselves, deriving from various sources or impulses, some of which are false or fearful. That is, they are too much based on public opinion or prejudice. As you may know, the ten scenes of La Ronde, all set in fin de siecle Vienna, involve sexual seduction or, to put it another way, sex is used as a medium in relationships between men and women. The playwright's focus, what the audience sees and hears, is on the interplay between the man and woman just preceding and immediately after the sex act, the act itself represented onstage by a blackout which the audience mentally fills in.

To my way of thinking the script is at times erotic but never pornographic. Schnitzler, a doctor of medicine by profession as well as a professional writer, is more clinical than sensational and his concern is with the socio-psychological relationships between the people which their most intimate desires reveal.

Still it is theatre and there is no avoiding some undressing needed for a convincing production, but complete nudity is unnecessary. Just as touchy for both audiences and actors is the sexual foreplay required in the scenes. If done accurately this should be comedic and therefore have some objectivity or distance for the audience, but as you can imagine the actors are more subjectively involved.

Fortunately I had no unusual difficulties with the actions required by the scenes, but I personally experienced an incident of self-censorship as I mentioned earlier. This began at auditions when a talented black actor, seeing that all others auditioning were white, asked if there was any chance of his being cast if he auditioned. I said there was that chance, that the cast need not be all white and that my casting of the production would be based on talent and sensitivity to the role. So he auditioned and I cast him as The Poet who appears in scenes seven and eight. To this day I am pleased I made that decision and I think the cast of our La Ronde production would agree with me. He contributed a great sense of comedy and discipline to the rehearsals and production. But I confess that I had some concern, given the intimacies of the scenes, about possible adverse audience reaction. Before rehearsals began I spoke to the two actresses who appeared in scenes with The Poet and they assured me that they had no reservations about either the scenes or the actor. Nevertheless, I was still aware of possible undesirable audience reaction either during or after performances. So far as I know my worries were unfounded, and I mention this 'non incident' to illustrate how I acted as my own censor where there was the temptation and certain conditioning to behave in a prejudicial manner, the temptation to play it

safe, to avoid possible problems or criticism.

In summation, my view of official censorship is that it is a tool of a larger propaganda scheme or pattern and its purpose is to ensure conformity. I think that--hope that--most Americans would resist official censorship, and also resist the attempts to censor by disguised intimidation or innuendo. Walter Kerr's four stages of censorship mentioned earlier seem to me to be fairly accurate and that in particular those of us who work in University Theatre must guard against the amateur censor and the establishment of a censorial attitude in society which turns judgement and inquiry into bias and fear.

Official censorship could not exist in University Theatre and in my experience I have not encountered it. What censorship that does exist is primarily, I believe, unofficial, often unspoken, consisting of group pressures, authority pressures, and financial pressures which influence directors and the production team into evading or avoiding the risks necessary for artistic growth and intellectual development. This sort of control is, of course, much less perceptible than objective-official censorship, but I believe, much more pervasive and persuasive.

I suppose every director in University Theatre would like his or her production to be popular with actors, audiences, administrators, but popularity alone is not one of the more profound measurements of accomplishments in a University Theatre which is part of a larger humanities education. Sometimes even a 'failure' can be educationally successful.

If I were to stress but one aspect of directing for University Theatre I would advocate the importance of risk in order to learn and test. Too often directors in University Theatre play it too safe, censor themselves too much. By risk I do not necessarily mean shock although that is sometimes a concomitant effect. What I do imply by risk is invention, experimentation, exploration and vision. When a theatre director omits these from the planning and work that is probably the worst kind of censorship possible.